

ZOLLIFFER, CRITTENDEN, AND THE MILL SPRINGS CAMPAIGN: SOME PERSISTENT QUESTIONS

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On 9 December 1861, Confederate troops commanded by Brigadier General Felix Zollicoffer left a relatively secure position at Mill Springs, Kentucky, and in a bold and surprising move crossed the Cumberland River to a seemingly defenseless site, Beech Grove. Various Civil War historians have harshly criticized Zollicoffer's advance, some even blaming the impending defeat at Logan's Crossroads on his new, exposed position.¹ But Zollicoffer's biographer and studies dealing specifically with the Mill Springs campaign have avoided the issue of the river crossing, offering no clear explanation for his actions.² It is the purpose of this essay to reexamine Zollicoffer's position on the Cumberland as well as Major General George Crittenden's decision to attack the Union forces at Logan's Crossroads and offer some possible explanations.

Mill Springs was a small community just south of the Cumberland River in south central Kentucky. The area had an abundance of crops, forage, and even a large grist mill, hence the name Mill Springs. These elements, combined with the formidable bluffs edging the Cumberland's southern bank, afforded Zollicoffer an

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1 Examples of criticism are: Ezra Warner, *Generals in Grey* (Baton Rouge, 1959), 350; R. M. Kelley, "Holding Kentucky for the Union," in Robert Johnson and Clarence Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (4 vols.; New York, 1887-88), 1: 387; Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative* (3 vols.; New York, 1958-74), 1: 176; Stanley Horn, *The Army of Tennessee* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1952), 68; John S. Bowman, *The Civil War Almanac* (New York, 1983), 81.

2 The following offer no explanation or opinion: E. M. Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1926); Lowell H. Harrison, *The Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington, 1975) and "Mill Springs, The Brilliant Victory," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, 10 (1972): 4-9, 44-47; R. Gerald McMurtry, "Zollicoffer and the Battle of Mill Springs," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 29 (October 1955): 303-319; Cassius M. Clay, "Postscript to the Battle of Mill Springs," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 30 (April 1956): 103-113; Raymond E. Myers, *The Zollicoffer Tree* (Louisville, 1964).

excellent location for establishing winter quarters for his troops while also presenting the Union command with the threat of an offensive thrust into central Kentucky.³ But, as Zollicoffer might have realized, as long as his army remained on the Cumberland's southern shore, it was not a creditable offensive threat. So only two weeks after his arrival at Mill Springs, Zollicoffer decided to put five infantry regiments, seven cavalry companies, and four pieces of artillery across the river at Beech Grove.⁴

At Louisville, Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell, Union Commander of the Department of the Ohio, doubted that Zollicoffer would cross the Cumberland in force, expecting rather only harmless demonstrations from the Confederates.⁵ Yet Buell could not be absolutely sure of Zollicoffer's intentions, and he ordered Brigadier General Albin Schoepf and several Union regiments southward toward Somerset to observe the Confederate activities. Schoepf and a small advance party arrived at Beech Grove before Zollicoffer's advance and hastily reported that the Confederate army was preparing to go into winter quarters.⁶ Duped into a false sense of security, Schoepf could not contest the Southern advance.

Beech Grove, a sparsely populated area directly across the river from Mill Springs, was an inferior location for the Confederate army because the cliffs along the southern shore dominated the entire area. But by erecting earthworks on the northern shore and keeping the remainder of his troops as well as several pieces of artillery atop the southern bluffs, Zollicoffer felt secure in making a stand in winter quarters at Beech Grove.

3 General Albert Sidney Johnston had approved a plan whereby Zollicoffer would establish a camp at Mill Springs, and, if not threatened by the enemy in the winter months, launch a spring offensive into the central part of the state. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Series I, Volume IV, 517, 527; Vol. VII, 12, 686, 697. Hereafter referred to as *OR*. William Preston Johnston, *The Life of General Albert Sidney Johnston* (New York, 1878), 357.

4 *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 476.

5 *Ibid.*, 458.

6 Winter quarters is repeatedly mentioned in both Confederate and Union correspondence. *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 527, 686, 697, 713, 797; Vol. LII, Part II, 243.

Schoepf, wanting to avoid the embarrassment of another inaccurate report, did an extensive reconnaissance of Zollicoffer's new position and concluded that Beech Grove could not be overrun without heavy loss of Union life. "Under these circumstances," Schoepf wrote, "I hardly know what move is best to be made."⁷ The next move, however, was made by Jefferson Davis, who replaced Zollicoffer with Major General George Crittenden, the former still remaining with the army.⁸

Davis wanted Kentucky's support for the Confederacy, and he hoped that the Crittenden name, which was widely recognized throughout the state, would bring hundreds of new recruits into Southern ranks. But Crittenden's first strategic decision only strengthened the view held by most well-informed Southerners that he was merely a political appointee. Without sufficient knowledge of the area and without discussing with Zollicoffer his reasons for crossing the Cumberland, Crittenden ordered Zollicoffer to return to Mill Springs.⁹ In an attempt to explain the order to Richmond officials, Crittenden cited scouting reports which told of large Union forces moving on Beech Grove.¹⁰ Union troops were indeed moving southward from Camp Dick Robinson, the principal Federal garrison in central Kentucky, but they posed no immediate problem for Zollicoffer, and he did not comply with Crittenden's order. Instead he maintained his stand at Beech Grove.

To explain conclusively why Zollicoffer crossed the Cumberland and then refused to move back is impossible because he left no personal or official papers with such information. Yet there are several possible explanations for his actions. As already mentioned, Zollicoffer's army at Mill Springs posed no immediate threat to the Union forces in central Kentucky. But from his

⁷ Ibid., Vol. VII, 506.

⁸ Crittenden was placed in command of the East Tennessee district on 11 November 1861, but he did not arrive at Mill Springs for three weeks. *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. IV, 538; Vol. VII, 764; Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (2 vols.; New York, 1881), 2: 20.

⁹ *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 769; Vol. LII, Part II, 239; Davis, *Rise and Fall*, 2: 20.

¹⁰ *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 769.

position at Beech Grove, Zollicoffer could if the opportunity arose, strike scattered Union columns, something that could not be done easily from south of the Cumberland.¹¹

Zollicoffer believed that his crossing of the Cumberland had created consternation among Union generals. This view was reflected by the *New York Tribune* which declared that Zollicoffer's move to Beech Grove:

...showed an unusual enterprise and energy on his part, as our generals, whom he took completely by surprise, were well disposed to admit. His subsequent selection for intrenched encampments on both banks of the river... proved him to be possessed of a good strategical eye.¹²

Crittenden's order to recross the Cumberland seems to have been a verbal command as no written order has been found. Zollicoffer could not rely on the message without personally communicating with Crittenden, which he tried to do unsuccessfully on several occasions.¹³ If the order had been telegraphed or written, Zollicoffer probably would have recrossed to avoid being in direct violation of a superior's command.

It is true that the Cumberland River trapped rather than protected the Confederates at Beech Grove.¹⁴ If Zollicoffer's army was confronted by a superior Union force, the river would become a liability instead of an asset. Zollicoffer must have realized this, however, and based on his scouting reports, he may have concluded that an enemy attack would not occur in the winter months.

Aware that the broken terrain north of the Cumberland would make it extremely difficult for the Union army to place artillery in position to bombard Beech Grove and with Confederate artillery atop the southern cliffs commanding all possible approaches

11 Thomas L. Connelly, *Army of the Heartland: The Army of Tennessee, 1861-1862* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 90.

12 *New York Tribune* [n.d.], quoted in Myers, *The Zollie Tree*, 72.

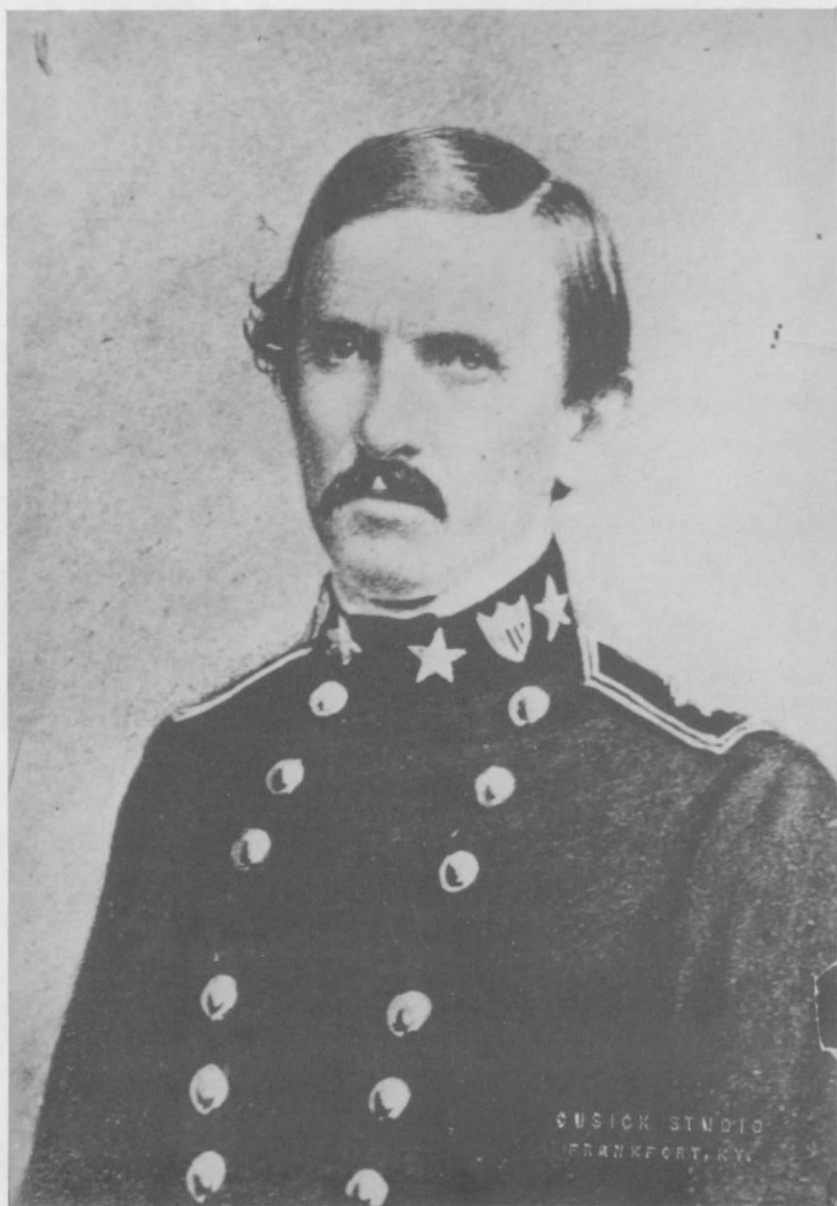
13 *OR.*, Ser. I. Vol. VII, 786.

14 Dividing an army on opposite river banks ran counter to age-old military strategy and tactics. For a recent study of Civil War logistics, strategy, and tactics, see Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How The North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).



General George Crittenden

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to the area, Zollicoffer may have felt he could convince Crittenden of the wisdom of the move when he arrived in person at Mill Springs. By fortifying the northern bank and controlling the area with artillery on the opposite shore, Zollicoffer chose to remain at Beech Grove.

On 3 January 1862, Crittenden arrived at Mill Springs. Surprised to find troops still at Beech Grove, he questioned Zollicoffer regarding the order to withdraw. Unsatisfied with his response, Crittenden immediately ordered rafts constructed for transporting the army back to Mill Springs.¹⁵ Four days later, the *Noble Ellis*, a stern-wheeler, arrived to aid in the move, but because of bad weather work on the rafts progressed slowly. Thus Crittenden's army remained divided; six infantry regiments and two cavalry battalions were at Beech Grove, and three infantry regiments and a battalion of cavalry were at Mill Springs.

Despite Crittenden's decision to retreat, the Confederates at Beech Grove continued to fortify their position which resembled a horseshoe due to the natural course of the Cumberland River. They had felled timber for a mile in front of the entrenchments to prevent a surprise frontal attack, while the precipitous southern bluffs of the Cumberland rendered an infantry flanking movement impractical.¹⁶ But the opportunity to strike the divided Confederate army proved too great a temptation for Buell, and by mid January Union troops commanded by Brigadier General George Thomas were encamped at Logan's Crossroads ten miles north of Beech Grove. Another brigade, commanded by Schoepf, was moving west from Somerset to rendezvous with Thomas, but it encountered numerous delays caused by the bad weather.

Crittenden received advice from a local resident on 18 January, that Schoepf's brigade was separated from Thomas by the flooding of Fishing Creek, a Cumberland tributary. Given an opportunity to strike a divided Union army, Crittenden reported to General Albert Sidney Johnston, Confederate Commanding General in the West that: "I am threatened by a superior force of the

¹⁵ Davis, *Rise and Fall*, 2: 20.

¹⁶ *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 536.

enemy in front, and finding it impossible to cross the river, I will have to make the fight on the ground I now occupy.”¹⁷

Late that evening, Crittenden convened a council of his subordinate officers and informed them of his plan to leave Beech Grove and attack Thomas. The Confederate army was awakened at midnight on 19 January to begin the ten mile march northward. Crittenden hoped to have his troops in position for attack before daylight, but they were delayed by a constant rain and muddy roads. Their arrival at Logan’s Crossroads roughly corresponded with breakfast for the Union troops, who, though surprised, were soon ready to give battle. Each army numbered about 4,000 men. Southern hopes for victory were dashed when they failed to break through the Union center and when Zollicoffer fell mortally wounded in the confusion of battle.¹⁸

The day had been a total failure for Crittenden. The attack did not go as planned; Zollicoffer was dead; and the Cumberland River stood between the retreating Confederates and escape. But, contrary to Crittenden’s excuse for the offensive, the impossibility of crossing the river, the army did escape across the flooded river. Arriving at Beech Grove in the late afternoon, Crittenden correctly sized up the situation. “With the morale of the army impaired by the action of the morning,” he observed, “I deemed an immediate crossing of the Cumberland River necessary.”¹⁹

The defeated and demoralized Confederates crossed to Mill Springs in the span of six hours between midnight and dawn. Thomas did not press his advantage as he believed the Confederates were trapped by the river and would be forced to surrender the following morning. However, when dawn arrived only

17 Ibid., 103.

18 The morning battle was fought in gloom as rain clouds hovered overhead and patches of fog passed across the battlefield. Musket and artillery smoke made visibility even worse. Under these circumstances, Zollicoffer rode from the safety of Confederate lines into Union lines where he was shot, probably by Colonel Speed Fry. Union casualties were given as thirty-nine killed and 207 wounded. The Confederates suffered 125 killed, 309 wounded, and ninety-nine missing. *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 82, 108.

19 Ibid., 109.

discarded supplies and equipment and some of the more severely wounded Confederates were found at Beech Grove.²⁰

It is doubtful that Crittenden's decision to attack Thomas was based solely on his belief that the Cumberland could not be crossed. A possible explanation, which has gone unnoticed by historians, was revealed by Crittenden himself several years after the war. In an attempt to justify his actions, Crittenden recalled that an immediate and surprise attack was necessary, "... that such [an] attack, if successful merely in repulsing him [Thomas], would probably give us time to cross the Cumberland with artillery and wagons, by means of our boats, then being built."²¹

Crittenden, of course, hoped for a resounding victory at Logan's Crossroads, but he also realized that a surprise attack, even if only moderately successful, would probably secure the time needed for transporting the artillery and wagons across the river.²² Crittenden had the services of the *Noble Ellis* as well as several flatboats with which he could transport men across the Cumberland no matter how high the water rose.²³ In fact, Crittenden moved two infantry regiments from Mill Springs to Beech Grove on 18 January to aid in the attack.²⁴

Furthermore, since Crittenden was able to move his troops across the Cumberland in the dark of night, it is conceivable that his entire army could have crossed the river. By moving supplies and equipment in late afternoon and men at night, the entire Confederate army probably could have withdrawn to Mill Springs before Thomas could have arrived at Beech Grove even if he were aware of the retreat. At no time prior to the battle were any major detachments of Union troops closer to the Confederate army than ten miles, the distance from Beech Grove to Lo-

20 Alfred Pirtle, "Journal, 1859-1862," 24 January 1862 (manuscript department, The Filson Club); *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 76, 81.

21 Davis, *Rise and Fall*, 2: 20.

22 *Ibid.*, 2: 22.

23 Schoepf had earlier reported that although the river was high, it could be crossed in flatboats. *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 8; Johnston, *The Life of Johnston*, 399.

24 *OR.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 105.

gan's Crossroads. Thomas's army would have had to travel over roads that the recent rains had made a quagmire. Even if attempted, the movement would have been a slow one, allowing Crittenden ample time to cross to Mill Springs. But perhaps the best explanation for the Confederate offensive was that Crittenden, motivated by the chance for a victory on his native soil, believed that the attack was not only in the best interests of his men, but, if successful, would thrust him into a very prominent position as well.

Zollicoffer's divided position on the Cumberland River will probably remain an object of controversy. But in view of the speculative explanations offered here, perhaps it has been erroneous to blame Zollicoffer for dividing his army and for the defeat at Logan's Crossroads. It is possible that the battle would have been avoided altogether except for Crittenden's desire for a victory because a retreat across the Cumberland was indeed accomplished even under adverse conditions. However, if the Confederates had won the battle at Logan's Crossroads, Crittenden's decision to attack probably would have been vindicated by historians. One thing is certain, though. The defeat at Logan's Crossroads was the first in a series of events that destroyed the Confederate line of defense across southern Kentucky. With the exception of occasional raids and the ill-fated invasion in August 1862, led by Braxton Bragg and Kirby Smith, Unionists remained in firm control of Kentucky for the duration of the Civil War.